Things

Ursula K. Le Guin

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

- Things
  -

Things
(The End)
Ursula K. Le Guin

On the shore of the sea he stood looking out over the long foam-lines far where vague the Islands lifted or were guessed. There, he said to the sea, there lies my kingdom. The sea said to him what the sea says to everybody. As evening moved from behind his back across the water the foam-lines paled and the wind fell, and very far in the west shone a star perhaps, perhaps a light, or his desire for a light.

He climbed the streets of his town again in late dusk. The shops and huts of his neighbors were looking empty now, cleared out, cleaned up, packed away in preparation for the end. Most of the people were up at the Weeping in Heights-Hall or down with the Ragers in the fields. But Lif had not been able to clear out and clean up; his wares and belongings were too heavy to throw away, too hard to break, too dull to bum. Only centuries could waste them. Wherever they were piled or dropped or thrown they formed what might have been, or seemed to be, or yet might be, a city. So he had not tried to get rid of bis things. His yard was still stacked and piled with bricks, thousands and thousands of bricks of his own making. The kiln stood cold but ready, the barrels of clay and dry mortar and lime, the hods and barrows and trowels of his trade, everything was there. One of the fellows from Scriveners Lane had asked sneering, Going to build a brick wall and hide behind it when that old end comes, man?

Another neighbor on his way up to the Heights-Hall gazed a while at those stacks and heaps and loads and mounds of well-shaped, well-baked bricks all a soft reddish gold in the gold of the afternoon sun, and sighed at last with the weight of them on his heart: Things, things! Free yourself of things, Lif, from the weight that drags you down! Come with us, above the ending world!

Lif had picked up a brick from the heap and put it in place on the stack and smiled in embarrassment. When they were all past he had gone neither up to the Hall nor out to help wreck the fields and kill the animals, but down to the beach, the end of the ending world, beyond which lay only water. Now back in his brickyard hut with the smell of salt in his clothes and his face hot with the sea wind, he felt neither the Ragers' laughing and wrecking despair nor the soaring and weeping despair of the communicants of the Heights; he felt empty; he felt hungry. He was a heavy little man and the sea wind at the world's edge had blown at him all evening without moving him at all.

Hey, Lif! said the widow from Weavers Lane, which crossed his street a few houses down, —I saw you coming up the street, and never another soul since sunset, and getting dark, and quieter than ... She did not say what the town was quieter than, but went on, Have you had your supper? I was about to take my roast out of the oven, and the little one and I will never eat up all that meat before the end comes, no doubt, and I hate to see good meat go to waste.

Welt thank you very much, says Lif, putting on his coat again; and they went down Masons Lane to Weavers Lane through the dark and the wind sweeping up steep streets from the sea. In the widow's lamplit house Lif played with her baby, the last bom in the town, a little fat boy just learning how to stand up. Lif stood him up and he laughed and fell over, while the widow set out bread and hot meat on the table of heavy woven cane. They sat to eat, even the baby, who worked with four teeth at a hard hunk of bread. — How is it you're not up on the Hill or in the fields? asked Lif, and the widow replied as if the answer sufficed to her mind, Oh, I have the baby.

Lif looked around the little house which her husband, who bad been one of Lif's bricklayers, had built. — This is good, he said. I haven't tasted meat since last year some time.

I know, I know! No houses being built any more.

Not a one, he said. Not a wall nor a henhouse, not even repairs. But your weaving, that's still wanted?

Yes; some of them want new clothes right up to the end. This meat I bought from the Ragers that slaughtered all my lord's flocks, and I paid with the money I got for a piece of fine linen 1 wove for my lord's daughter's gown that she wants to wear at the end! The widow gave a little derisive, sympathetic snort, and went on: But now there's no flax, and scarcely any wool. No more to spin, no more to weave. The fields burnt and the flocks dead.

Yes, said Lif, eating the good roast meat. Bad times, he said, the worst times.

And now, the widow went on, where's bread to come from, with the fields burnt? And water, now they're poisoning the wells? I sound like the Weepers up there, don't I? Help yourself, Lif. Spring lamb's the finest meat in the world, my man always said, till autumn came and then he'd say roast pork's the finest meat in the world. Come on. now, give yourself a proper slice. ...

That night in his hut in the brickyard Lif dreamed. Usually he slept as still as the bricks themselves but this night he drifted and floated in dream all night to the Islands, and when he woke they were no longer a wish or a guess: like a star as daylight darkens they had become certain, he knew them. But what, in his dream, had borne him over the water? He had not flown, he had not walked, he had not

gone underwater like the fish; yet be had come across the grey-green plains and wind-moved hillocks of the sea to the Islands, he had heard voices call, and seen the Lights of towns.

He set his mind to think how a man could ride on water. He thought of how grass floats on streams, and saw how one might make a sort of mat of woven cane and lie on it pushing with one's bands: but the great canebreaks were still smoldering down by the stream, and the piles of withies at the basketmaker's had all been burnt. On the Islands in his dream be had seen canes or grasses half a hundred feet high, with brown stems thicker than his arms could reach around, and a world of green leaves spread sunward from the thousand outreaching twigs. On those stems a man might ride over the sea. But no such plants grew in his country nor ever had; though in the Heights-Hall was a knife-handle made of a dull brown stuff, said to come from a plant that grew in some other land, called wood. But he could not ride across the bellowing sea on a knife-handle.

Greased hides might float; but the tanners had been idle now for weeks, there were no hides for sale. He might as well stop looking about for any help. He carried his barrow and his largest hod down to the beach that white windy morning and laid them in the still water of a lagoon. Indeed they floated, deep in the water, but when he leaned even the weight of one hand on them they tipped, filled, sank. They were too light, he thought.

He went back up the cliff and through the streets, loaded the barrow with useless well-made bricks, and wheeled a hard load down. As so few children had been born these last years there was no young curiosity about to ask him what he was doing, though a Rager or two, groggy from last night's wreckfest, glanced sidelong at him from a dark doorway through the brightness of the air. All that day he brought down bricks and the makings of mortar, and the next day, though he had not had the dream again, be began to lay his bricks there on the blustering beach of March with rain and sand handy in great quantities to set his cement. He built a little brick dome, upside down, oval with pointed ends like a fish, all of a single course of bricks laid spiral very cunningly. If a cupful or a barrowful of air would float, would not a brick domeful? And it would be strong. But when the mortar was set, and straining his broad back he overturned the dome and pushed it into the cream of the breakers, it dug deeper and deeper into the wet sand, burrowing down like a clam or a sand flea. The waves filled it, and refilled it when he tipped it empty, and at last a green-shouldered breaker caught it with its white dragging backpull, rolled it over, smashed it back into its elemental bricks and sank them in the restless sodden sand. There stood Lif wet to the neck and wiping salt spray out of his eyes. Nothing lay westward on the sea

but wavewrack and rain-clouds. But they were there. He knew them, with their great grasses ten times a man's height, their wild golden fields raked by the sea wind, their white towns, their white-crowned hills above the sea; and the voices of shepherds called on the hills.

I'm a builder, not a floater, said Lir after he had considered his stupidity from all sides. And he came doggedly out of the water and up the cliff-side path and through the rainy streets to get another barrowload of. bricks.

Free for the first time in a week from his fool dream of floating, he noticed now that Leather Street seemed deserted. The tannery was rubbishy and vacant. The craftsmen's shops lay like a row of little black gaping mouths, and the sleeping-room windows above them were blind. At the end of the lane an old cobbler was burning, with a terrible stench, a small heap of new shoes never worn. Beside him a donkey waited, saddled, flicking its ears at the stinking smoke.

Lif went on and loaded his barrow with bricks. This time as he wheeled it down, straining back against the tug of the barrow on the steep streets, swinging all the strength of his shoulders to balance its course on the winding cliff-path down to the beach, a couple of townsmen followed him. Two or three more from Scriveners Lane followed after them, and several more from the streets round the market place, so that by the time he straightened up, the sea foam fizzing on his bare black feet and the sweat cold on his (ace, there was a little crowd strung out along the deep single track of his barrow over the sand. They had the lounging listless air of Ragers. Lif paid them no heed, though he was aware that the widow of Weavers Lane was up on the cliffs watching with a scared face.

He ran the barrow out into the sea till the water was up to his chest, and tipped the bricks out, and came running in with a great breaker, his banging barrow full of foam.

Already some of the Ragers were drifting away down the beach. A tall fellow from the Scriveners Lane lot lounged by him and said with a little grin, Why don't you throw 'em from the top of the cliff, man?

They'd only hit the sand, said Lif.

And you want to drown 'em. Well good. You know there was some of us thought you was building something down here! They was going to make cement out of you. Keep those bricks wet and cool, man.

Grinning, the Scrivener drifted off, and Lif started up the cliff for another load.

Come for supper, Lif, said the widow at the cliffs top with a worried voice, holding her baby close to keep it from the wind.

I will, he said. I'll bring a loaf of bread, I laid in a couple before the bakers left. He smiled, but she did not. As they climbed the streets

together she asked, Are you dumping your bricks in the sea, Lif?

He laughed wholeheartedly and answered yes.

She had a look then that might have been relief and might have been sadness; but at supper in her lamplit house she was quiet and easy as ever, and they ate their cheese and stale bread with good cheer.

Next day he went on carrying bricks down load after load, and if the Ragers watched him they thought him busy on their own kind of work. The slope of the beach out to deep water was gradual, so that he could keep building without ever working above water. He had started at low tide so that his work would never be laid bare. At high tide it was hard, dumping the bricks and trying to lay them in rough courses with the whole sea boiling in his face and thundering over his head, but he kept at it. Towards evening he brought down long iron rods and braced what be had built, for a crosscurrent tended to undermine his causeway about eight feet from its beginning. He made sure that even the tips of the rods were under water at low tide, so that no Rager might suspect an affirmation was being made. A couple of elderly men coming down from a Weeping in the Heights-Hall passed him clanging and battering his empty barrow up the stone streets in dusk, and gravely smiled upon him. It is well to be free of Things, said one softly, and the other nodded.

Next day, though still he had not dreamed of the Islands again, Lif went on building his causeway. The sand began to shelve off more steeply as he went further. His method now was to stand on the last bit he had built and tip the carefully-loaded barrow from there, and then tip himself off and work, floundering and gasping and coming up and pushing down, to get the bricks levelled and fitted between the pre-set rods; then up again, across the grey sand and up the cliff and bang-clatter through the quiet streets for another load.

Some time that week the widow said, meeting him in his brickyard, Let me throw 'em over the cliff for you, it'll save you one leg of the trip.

It's heavy work loading the barrow, he said.

Oh, well, said she.

All right, so long as you want to. But bricks are heavy bastards. Don't try to carry many. I'll give you the small barrow. And the little rat here can sit on the load and get a ride.

So she helped him on and off through days of silvery weather, fog in the morning, clear sea and sky all afternoon, and the weeds in crannies of the cliff flowering; there was nothing else left to flower. The causeway ran out many yards from shore now, and Lif had bad to learn a skill which no one else had ever learned that he knew of, except the fish. He could float and move himself about on the water or

under it, in the very sea, without touching foot or hand to solid earth.

He had never heard that a man could do this thing; but he did not think much about it, being so busy with his bricks, in and out of air and in and out of water all day long, with the foam, the bubbles of water-circled air or air-circled water, all about him, and the fog, and the April rain, a confusion of the elements. Sometimes he was happy down in the murky green unbreathable world, wrestling strangely willful and weightless bricks among the staring shoals, and only the need of ait drove him gasping up into the spray-laden wind.

He built all day long, scrambling up on the sand to collect the bricks that his faithful helper dumped over the cliff's edge for him, load them in his barrow and run them out the causeway that went straight out a foot or two under sea level at low tide and four or five feet under at high, then dumped them at the end, dive in, and build; then back ashore for another load. He came up into town only at evening, worn out, salt-bleared and salt-itching, hungry as a shark, to share what food turned up with the widow and her little boy. Lately, though spring was getting on with soft, long, warm evenings, the town was very dark and still.

One night when he was not too tired to notice this one spoke of it, and the widow said, Oh, they're all gone now, I think.

—All? A pause. —Where did they go?

She shrugged. She raised her dark eyes to his across the table and gazed through lamplit silence at him for a time. Where? she said. Where does your sea-road lead, Lif?

He stayed still for a while. To the Islands, he answered at last, and then laughed and met her look.

She did not laugh. She only said, Are they there? Is it true, then, there are Islands? Then she looked over at her sleeping baby, and out the open doorway into the darkness of late spring that lay warm in the streets where no one walked and the rooms where no one lived.

At last she looked back at Lif, and said to him, Lif, you know, there aren't many bricks left. A few hundred. You'll have to make some more. Then she began to cry softly.

By God! said Lif, thinking of his underwater road across the sea that went for a hundred and twenty feet, and the sea that went on ten thousand miles from the end of it—I'll swim there! Now then, don't cry, deaf heart. Would I leave you and the little rat here by yourselves? After ail the bricks you've nearly hit my head with, and all the queer weeds and shellfish you've found us to eat lately, after your table and fireside and your bed and your laughter would I leave you when you cry? Now be still, don't cry. Let me think of a way we can get to the Islands, all of us together.

But he knew there was no way. Not for a brickmaker. He had

done what he could do. What he could do went one hundred and twenty feet from shore.

Do you think, he asked after a long time, during which she had cleared the table and rinsed the plates in wellwater that was coming dear again now that the Ragers had been gone many days—Do you think that maybe . . . this . . . He found it hard to say but she stood quiet, waiting, and he had to say it: That this is the end?

Stillness. In the one lamplit room and all the dark rooms and streets and the burnt fields and wasted lands, stillness. In the black Hall above them on the hill's height, stillness. A silent air, a silent sky, silence in all places unbroken, unreplying. Except for the far sound of the sea, and, very soft though nearer, the breathing of a sleeping child.

No, the woman said. She sat down across from him and put her hands upon the table, fine hands as dark as earth, the palms like ivory. No, she said, the end will be the end. This is still just the waiting for it.

Then why arc we still here—just us?

Oh, well, she said, you had your things—your bricks —and I had the baby....

Tomorrow we must go he said after a time. She nodded.

Before sunrise they were up. There was nothing at all left to eat, and so when she had put a few clothes for the baby in a bag and had on her warm leather mantle, and he had stuck his knife and trowel in his belt and put on a warm cloak that had been her husband's, they left the little house, going out into the cold wan light in the deserted streets.

They went downhill, he leading, she following with the sleepy child in a fold of her cloak. He turned neither to the road that led north up the coast nor to the southern road, but went on past the market place and out on the cliff and down the rocky path to the beach. All the way she followed and neither of them spoke. At the edge of the sea he turned.

I'll keep you up in the water as long as we can manage, he said.

She nodded, and said softly, We'll use the road you built, as far as it goes.

He took her free hand and led her into the water. It was cold. It was bitter cold, and the cold light from the east behind them shone on the foam-lines hissing on the sand. When they stepped on the beginning of the causeway the bricks were firm under their feet, and the child had gone back to sleep on her shoulder in a fold of her cloak.

As they went on the buffeting of the waves got stronger. The tide was coming in. The outer breakers wet their clothes, chilled their flesh, drenched their hair and faces. They reached the end of his long

work. There lay the beach a little way behind them, the sand dark under the cliff over which stood the silent, paling sky. Around them was wild water and foam. Ahead of them was the unresting water, the great abyss, the gap.

A breaker hit them on its way in to shore and they staggered; the baby, waked by the sea's hard slap, cried, a little wail in the long, cold, hissing mutter of the sea always saying the same thing.

Oh, I can't! cried the mother, but she gripped the man's hand more firmly and came on at his side.

Lifting his head to take the last step from what he had done towards no shore, he saw the shape riding the western water, the leaping light, the white flicker like a swallow's breast catching the break of day. It seemed as if voices rang over the sea's voice. What is it? he said, but her head was bowed to her baby, trying to soothe the little wail that challenged the vast babbling of the sea. He stood still and saw the whiteness of the sail, the dancing light above the waves, dancing on. towards them and towards the greater light that grew behind them.

Wait, the call came from the form that rode the grey waves and danced on the foam, Wait! The voices rang very sweet, and as the sail leaned white above him he saw the faces and the reaching arms, and heard them say to him, Come, come on the ship, come with us to the Islands.

Hold on, he said softly to the woman, and they took the last step.